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SUBJECT: GUIDANCE: MIDDLE EAST BRIEFING, SEPTEMBER 17

¶1. (U) This is an action message. USUN is authorized to draw from the points in para 2 below during the Middle East Briefing scheduled for September 18.

¶2. (U) Begin points:

-- I thank Under-Secretary Pascoe for his briefing on the situation in the Middle East. Today, I would like to make four points with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and then turn to the situation in Lebanon.

-- First, we remain strongly committed to achieving a peace agreement. The ongoing bilateral Israeli-Palestinian talks are sincere, substantive negotiations that are addressing all issues without exception. They remain confidential at the parties' request.

-- Secretary Rice's intense personal engagement on this issue demonstrates our commitment to achieving a peaceful, two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as quickly as possible. The Secretary traveled again to Jerusalem and Ramallah on August 26 for tri-lateral talks, as she has almost every month since the conference in Annapolis last November.

-- Separately, Israel and Syria are continuing indirect peace talks under the auspices of Turkey. While the United States will continue to focus on the Israeli-Palestinian track, we support efforts to bring peace and stability to the region. Such a goal cannot be achieved, however, without addressing the breadth of Syria's activities of concern, including its support for terrorist groups, its facilitation of foreign fighters entering Iraq, and the shipment of weapons across its border into Lebanon.

-- Second, Palestinian capacity building is key to the success of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Supporting Salam Fayyad's Palestinian Reform and Development Plan remains a top priority of the U.S. Government and the international community.

-- Total U.S. assistance to the Palestinians in 2008 will surpass our pledged level of \$555 million, including \$264 million in project assistance, \$150 million in direct budget support, and \$184.6 million for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Recently, the U.S. Congress approved an additional \$150 million in direct budgetary assistance for FY09, and \$50 million in project assistance. The United States is the largest bilateral donor to UNRWA and our \$184.6 million in assistance for 2008 represents a 20 percent increase over 2007, aiding a total of more than 4.6 million Palestinian refugees.

-- We commend the assistance provided to the Palestinian Authority by our European partners. We also recognize Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria and Kuwait for their support of the PA, and continue to urge regional governments to provide additional support and fulfill all

outstanding commitments, including pledges of budget support made at the 2002 Arab League summit in Beirut. The Palestinian Authority is in dire straits financially and urgently needs additional international support. We look forward to the meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee scheduled for September 22 which will address this situation.

-- We are also working to support the parties' efforts to improve security. At several previous briefings, I have highlighted progress being made in Jenin towards Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation. While efforts in that city will not lead to an instantaneous transformation, there is cause for optimism, as U.S.-trained Palestinian security forces gradually assume greater responsibility to uphold law and order, and crack down on terrorism. This opens up new possibilities for economic and social advances.

-- Third, we remain committed to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. We will never abandon the people of Gaza, and urge all parties to adhere to the period of calm that began on June 19 as a result of Egypt's efforts.

-- We condemn the violent efforts by Hamas and other groups to usurp the lawful authority of the Palestinian government in Gaza. The Quartet's principles remain determinative: renunciation of violence and terror, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements between the parties.

-- Finally, we reiterate our deep concern at continuing Israeli settlement activity, and call on Israel to freeze this activity and dismantle outposts erected since March 2001, consistent with its Roadmap obligations. Settlement activity has a negative effect on the atmosphere for negotiations with the potential to harm them going forward. In this regard, we do note recent deliberations within the Israeli government on future compensation for settlers to leave settlements voluntarily.

-- There have been calls for this body to address the issue of settlements in resolutions or senior-level meetings. However, a debate at this time can damage the sensitive process of confidential, bilateral negotiations addressing all issues without exception, in which the parties are intensively engaged. To ensure the greatest possibility for a final resolution of the settlement issue, the United States remains firmly opposed to the Council taking up this question at this time. The Quartet continues to be the pre-eminent mechanism for coordinating international support for the peace negotiations.

-- Turning to Lebanon, I wish first to convey again our condolences for political leader Saleh Aridi, struck down by assassins on September 10. We strongly condemn this cowardly terrorist attack, as we do all such attacks. We are deeply concerned about this development, and urge the parties to carry on nonetheless, despite the dangers, with their historic national dialogue talks scheduled to start this week.

-- The United States views full implementation of UNSCRs 1559, 1680 and 1701, and fulfillment of the pledges made in the Doha Agreement, as essential to safeguard Lebanon's sovereignty and security. We look forward to speedy implementation of the August 14 announcement by Syria and Lebanon that they will establish full diplomatic relations with the exchange of missions at the ambassadorial level. Full normalization must also include other measures aimed at ending Syria's continuing interference in Lebanon, including the delineation of the Lebanese-Syrian border. We call on the Secretary-General to engage with Syria and Lebanon to encourage immediate progress on this issue.

-- We remain concerned, however, at persistent reports of breaches of the arms embargo along the Lebanon-Syria border, and note the Secretary-General's observation of

full implementation of the embargo as an indispensable provision of resolution 1701 that must be observed immediately, comprehensively, and without exception. Unfortunately, the August 27 report of the Lebanon International Border Assessment Team shows no progress at all over the past two years on interdicting arms smuggling across this border. The report concludes that "the present state of border security is insufficient to prevent smuggling, in particular the smuggling of arms." Regional parties maintaining ties with Hizballah and other groups in Lebanon, especially Iran and Syria, are obliged to respect and abide fully by the arms embargo on Lebanon.

-- We strongly support the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces in their courageous efforts to restore calm. As provided in resolution 1701, there must be no unauthorized weapons in Lebanon. The international community must stand with Lebanon's government to insist on the authority of the state and the illegitimacy of all other armed groups, including Hizballah, that undermine the government's authority and the resolutions of this Council. Two years after the conflict instigated by Hizballah, this remains the most important matter for the Council to consider with regard to its responsibility to safeguard international peace and security.

-- We welcome the Secretary General's intention to strengthen the diplomatic process aimed at dealing with the issue of the Sheba'a Farms. We urge him to engage directly with Israel, Lebanon, and Syria on this issue, including via a technical mission that would visit the three countries to discuss the cartographers report and next steps in detail, and report back to the Council. We also strongly support the work of the UN Independent Investigative Commission and look forward to the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

End points.
RICE